

Profiles in Courage

Prior to being elected president, John F. Kennedy served as a U.S. senator from the state of Massachusetts. In the following excerpt from his 1955 Pulitzer Prize winning book *Profiles in Courage*, Kennedy discusses the many interests that a senator must balance.

The primary responsibility of a Senator, most people assume, is to represent the views of his state. Ours is a Federal system—a Union of relatively sovereign states whose needs differ greatly—and my Constitutional obligations as Senator would thus appear to require me to represent the interests of my state. Who will speak for Massachusetts if her own Senators do not? Her rights and even her identity become submerged. Her equal representation in Congress is lost. Her aspirations [goals], however much they may from time to time be in the minority, are denied that equal opportunity to be heard. . . .

Any Senator need not look very long to realize that his colleagues are representing *their* local interests. And if such interests are ever to be abandoned in favor of the national good, let the constituents—not the Senator—decide when and to what extent. . . .

But . . . we have not yet told the full story. For in Washington we are “United States Senators” and members of the Senate of the United States as well as Senators from Massachusetts and Texas. Our oath of office is administered by the Vice President, not by the Governors of our respective states; and we come to Washington . . . as members of the deliberative assembly [assembly whose role it is to make decisions] of one nation with one interest. Of course, we should not ignore the needs of our area—nor could we easily as products of that area—but none could be found to look out for the

national interest if local interests wholly dominated the role of each of us.

There are other obligations in addition to those of state and region. . . . We believe in this country in the principle of party responsibility, and we recognize the importance of adhering to party platforms. . . .

But when party and officeholder differ as to how the national interest is to be served, we must place first the responsibility we owe not to our party or even to our constituents but to our individual consciences.

But it is a little easier to dismiss one’s obligations to local interests and party ties than to face squarely the problem of one’s responsibility to the will of his constituents. A Senator who avoids this responsibility would appear to be accountable to no one, and the basic safeguards of our democratic system would thus have vanished. . . .

In short, . . . if I am to be properly responsive to the will of my constituents, it is my duty to place their principles, not mine, above all else. This . . . is the essence of democracy, faith in the wisdom of the people and their views. To be sure, the people will make mistakes—they will get no better government than they deserve—but that is far better than the representative of the people arrogating [taking without authorization] for himself the right to say he knows better than they what is good for them. Is he not chosen, the argument closes, to vote as they would vote were they in his place?

Thinking Critically

1. According to Kennedy, to what entities is a senator responsible?
2. In what situations should a senator go against local interests?
3. Why is a senator’s primary responsibility to the constituents?

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